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ABSTRACT

This publication discusses plans for an experimental "middenschool" program, which is being considered for adoption in the Netherlands. The middenschool program would extend the period of basic education beyond primary school into the first stage of secondary school, serving students in the 12-16 or 11-15 age bracket. This booklet provides a basic overview of the proposed middenschool program and describes its relationship to the overall educational system in the Netherlands. (JG)

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THE SECONDARY SCHOOL, FIRST STAGE („MIDDENSCHOOL") IN THE NETHERLANDS

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THE SECONDARY SCHOOL, FIRST STAGE („MIDDENSCHOOL") IN THE NETHERLANDS

Introduction

The secondary school, first stage („Middenschool") has not yet been introduced in the Netherlands. Experiments have been started. We shall see whether the „Middenschool" is introduced and, if so, what form it takes, after the experiments have been completed.
The „Middenschool"-project is not an isolated phenomenon. It is part of a design which includes the whole of education from nursery or primary school to university. Those who are interested in this plan should read the discussion Memorandum „Contours of a Future Education System", published by the Publishing Department of the Government Printing Office 1975, The Hague. An English translation of the complete text and English, German and French translations of the summary are obtainable from the Ministry of Education and Science, The Hague. The points of departure for a possible „Middenschool" are derived from the Contours Memorandum.

1. The place of the „middenschool" in the educational structure

Both at home and abroad the period of basic education is tending to get longer. One of the main reasons is the general belief that everyone should possess more knowledge and skills in order to take a full part in our present society.
Basic education will therefore continue after primary school, in the form of a secondary school, first stage („middenschool"). At present we are thinking in terms of children aged from 12 to 16 years, but experiments will show whether the ages of 11 to 15 might be better. Just as in the primary school, the emphasis in the „middenschool" will lie on developing the knowledge and skills which everyone needs to be able to function properly in society. In the case of the „middenschool" this includes:

- the orientation of the pupils in their later choice of study and career, and
- a tentative determination, subject to modification, of the children's potential in this respect.

In the „middenschool" all children, whatever their abilities and whatever their home background, remain together in age groups without pre-selection. These are called heterogeneous, or mixed ability, age groups. The children in these groups will then be re-grouped according to their interest and inclination into homogeneous groups varying according to level and type of activity, where they can improve their skills and themselves.
A development report will be drawn up on each individual pupil as he reaches the end of the „middenschool". The standard reached, the skills, gifts and interests of the pupil will be reported. Suggestions for the further study and career opportunities open to him will also be included.

2. General points of departure for the „middenschool"

The following points are the main ones for similar forms of comprehensive or integrated schools in other countries too:

- All children of one school year regardless of their bent, home background, sex or learning achievements receive general and vocational teaching together. Of course this does not mean that all children in one age-group will be taught all parts of the curriculum at the same level. A uniform school of this description has been rejected out of hand: the less gifted children would be failures, the gifted children would be held back and the mediocre would be raised to the norm. Breaking with the barriers in the existing categorial system must not be allowed to lead to uniformity and levelling down. On the contrary, a new form of teaching must be devised in which each individual pupil can

develop his unique personality to the full according to his bent, interest and ability. As already indicated in the preceding paragraph, this can best be done in a system in which all children remain together in non-preselected age groups for some activities, and diverge from there into variable groups according to type of activity and level.

- The choice of further study and career is postponed until a later date. Nowadays, in the categorial education system, children generally have to choose at the age of 12, which usually has radical consequences for the rest of their lives. In the „middenschool" the choice is postponed until as close as possible to their sixteenth year.
- The efforts of the primary school to offer equal, that is to say optimum, opportunities to all children for development are continued. It is expected that a contribution can be made to this by reducing disadvantages caused by home background and by the limitations of the traditional female role.
- The content of the education offered to 12 to 16 year olds can be broadened. This can be achieved by increasing the number of subjects and offering opportunities for a more balanced and less narrow (= wider) development of all the skills the children have. These explicity include the creative, or artistic, organisational and social skills.
- Suitable teaching and learning situations can be offered for individual development and the stimulation of social awareness. More than hitherto, education can help people to stop regarding society and their place in it is as a fait-accompli, and to see them instead as things which they themselves can do something to change.

3. Earlier attempts in the same direction

These points of departure for the „middenschool" are not exactly brand new, not even in the Netherlands. Many ideas akin to these are to be found in the Secondary Education Act, 1968.

4. Features of the „middenschool"

The following main features of the „middenschool" can be derived from these points of departure:

a. early, unilateral selection will be avoided as much as possible and replaced by a system of placement in a number of different ability groups varying according to activity and level (the homogeneous groups);
b. the more or less final choice of study and career will be postponed until as near as possible to the 16th year;
c. equality of opportunity, that is to say genuine opportunities for development for all children, will be made the central tenet as much as possible;
d. not only intellectual and technical qualities will count, but certainly also creative, artistic, organisational and social qualities;
e. the teaching/learning processes are geared as far as possible to the individual children.

These features are discussed more fully one by one in the next sections.

5. The avoidance of early, unilateral selection

Numerous research projects have shown that the choice of school or of career is usually made at too early an age. Usually it is not made by the pupil himself. And in many cases the choice turns out to be incorrect.

The situation in the Netherlands is not yet ideal in this respect, though there have been improvements due to the Secondary Education Act, 1968.

As in many other countries, exclusiveness has become a feature of the various types of schools in the Netherlands because of the categorial distribution of educational facilities. This leads to a premature and often permanent distribution of pupils in our selection system, which bases its decisions more on the characteristics of the types of school rather

than on the individual potential of the children. In addition, the children's home background often influences the choice of school.
The reason is that our present society, though providing a general basic education and some vocational education, nevertheless has been mainly interested in forming a small top layer of intellectually gifted people.
A change in this idea could be observed after the war and at present it is much more marked.
The idea is gaining ground that it is not enough to set children on the right road. Children from twelve to sixteen years of age must no longer be tested over and over again, all at the same time, against a series of fixed standards, which may result in some of them being excluded. It should be exactly the other way round: the teaching and learning process must be directed to what the children can do, as far as both achievements and speed of working are concerned. The idea of the „middenschool" is to try not to test the pupils against a uniform school standard but to assess them by determining what the children are capable of doing and to guide them towards the realisation of their potential.

6. Placement in variable activity and ability groups
For some activities all pupils can remain together in unselected age groups (the mixed ability groups). From there they go to groups differing according to activity and level (the homogeneous groups). To which groups they go depends on the aspirations and abilities of the pupils. The teachers (the school) will help. This process is called „determination". There is no selection in the form of repeat years. But „determination" does not mean that every pupil can be admitted to every homogeneous group. A particular group may be beyond a pupil's ability, in spite of his aspirations. Or to put it an other way: a different group may fit his abilities better. In a case such as this the school may not only advise against his entry to a particular homogeneous group, but also forbid it and refer him to an other group. Up to this point determination may therefore mean selection. We shall be referring to this problem in subsequent sections.

7. Postponement of the choice of study and career
At the time of the introduction of the Secondary Education Act and subsequently there have been attempts to postpone the choice of study and career. But owing to the categorial structure of the nowadays system, a major obstacle to a genuine postponement for every pupil nevertheless remained. It is these obstacles that have brought us to the idea that we must not stop at a one-year transition class for each school type and a few facilities for transfer. Reverting to the original ideas of the spiritual fathers of the Secondary Education Act, we have arrived at the concept of a „middenschool" in which final choices are postponed as long as possible.
This does not mean the „middenschool" would ignore the choice of study and career. On the contrary, it is the express intention that orientation in the opportunities for later study and careers will be provided in addition to a general education. But it must be confined to orientation as much as possible. For example, no occupational training courses are provided in the „middenschool". They do not come until after the „middenschool".

Determination according to variable homogeneous groups can help in this orientation. By this means the children will be able to find where their interests and abilities lie. This also means that they will discover where the limits of their capacity lie – for the time being at any rate.
At the end of the „middenschool" a development report will be drawn up for each individual pupil. As we have already seen, the report will include the level of achievement, skills, gifts and interests of the pupil. Not all development reports will give admission to all courses of study in further education. The reports will also contain suggestions for further

study and career openings.
The suggestions will have to leave as many options as possible open to middle school leavers. If this is not done, further education courses will immediately start setting specific requirements of previous education and these requirements could in their turn lead to categorial divisions in the „middenschool". On the other hand, the suggestions in the reports must be regarded as binding to some extent. Selection is applied in further education. Complete and mass disregard of these suggestions could have disastrous results in the first year of further education courses. We shall be returning to this in section 10.

8. Equal opportunities
Numerous children have not received all possible opportunities at primary school and at categorial secondary schools in the past. As a result of differences in cultural pattern between school and home background, they have lagged behind. A difference in the results obtained by different pupils has been apparent, even if their ability was the same.
The new primary school and „ middenschool" are designed to offer equal opportunities to all by removing as far as possible the obstacles of unequal beginnings, mostly arising from unfavourable home circumstances, but also from limitations imposed by the traditional female role expectations.
Equality of opportunity for all is too often seen as the uniform treatment of all. This is incorrect. This is equality in name only and not in reality.
The children must get the opportunity to develop with equal freedom according to their own gifts. Extreme care must be taken, however, that a certain basic level of knowledge and skill in a few elementary fields is attempted and indeed obtained.

9. The promotion of creative, artistic, organisational and social qualities
Individual development in the „middenschool" requires in the first place a certain basic level for everyone, for social reasons. In the second place it is a question of guiding the development of specific gifts in children, who are by definition unique.
In our present education system emphasis is laid too much on cognitive development on the one hand and on a very premature specialisation in certain trades and occupations on the other hand. Individual development, however, is only possible if attention is paid not only to cognitive qualities such as social, cultural, artistic and emotional ones. The latter may be just as important as the former for the development of the personality and of society.
Education can – more than hitherto – help people to see society and their place in society not as an unalterable fact, but as things which they themselves can do something to change. The new primary school and „middenschool" will have a duty to promote the further democratisation of society by preparing pupils for their later duties and role as mature citizens. For this purpose emphasis will be laid in the teaching and learning process on teaching children to develop their own opinions, a critical attitude and social and organisational skills. Pupils should regard it as normal that everyone in society shares in thinking, expressing opinions and taking decisions – in whatever form. The „middenschool" will therefore have to include in its school curriculum the stimulation of social awareness, and the provision of the tools to make something of it as an integral part of general education.
Artistic and emotional qualities must also be developed in school. The „middenschool" should attach great value to this. Much attention will be paid to these qualities, notably in the mixed ability groups.

10. Adjustment of learning processes to pupils

– *„streaming"*

We have already learned a great deal from experience and from study of comprehensive systems abroad.

In the first place experience has been gained of a „middenschool" in which pupils are still divided according to their general level of achievement („streaming"). This sort of division, we learn from experience, begins to assume the character of a categorial division.

– *„setting"*

In the second place experience has been gained with grouping and dividing pupils consistently according to their level of achievement in each subject or group of subjects („setting"). One of the consequences of this is that children feel disoriented because they are constantly having to change groups. The rating of the various subjects in our present society will most probably continue to play a large part: There is a danger that cultural, artistic, emotional and probably social subjects will be swamped, they will usually only be chosen if there is very strong motivation. Also,this system of „setting" quickly turns into „streaming".

– *internal differentiation*

„Streaming" and „setting" together are expressed in the term „external differentiation": the children are placed in certain groups according to the kind of activity and academic standard. The system of mixed ability groups and homogeneous groups roughly described in the foregoing sections is called internal differentiation. Most recent experience points in the direction of a form of internal differentiation which takes the stable, constant, small group as the basic unit of the teaching and learning organisation rather than the individual pupil. „Internal differentiation" is the ideal which must be sought after the „middenschool". With internal differentiation it is a question of steering carefully and cautiously between Scylla and Charybdis. These two extremes are:

- If *every* „middenschool" leaver can and may be admitted to *every* further education course, *every* high school course must start at the minimum level of the slowest and least gifted pupils. This is impossible, if only because the available funds are limited.
- If further education courses may set their own requirements as to previous education in the „middenschool" (as recorded in the development report), there is a good chance that in spite of the internal differentiation label there will in fact be „setting" and „streaming" and thus „external differentiation".

11. Problems to be solved in „middenschool"-experiments

At the request of the schools and on the initiative of local and other authorities, a number of institutes have been set up in this country in the past few years which together will form part of a support structure serving educational development. Teacher training institutes (initial training, refresher training and supplementary training), advisory services, curriculum development and research belong to this structure. These institutes will be able to make a major contribution to supporting the schools in their efforts to form the „middenschool". Experience abroad can be of great service in helping us to design the „middenschool". But we cannot be satisfied with copying foreign examples. After all, the social situation is often very different. The schools in the Netherlands will therefore usually have to regard a solution of their own in their own situation as their first goal.

– *The length of the course*

Although a „middenschool" with a 4-year course has been proposed in this Memorandum, it will have to be discovered experimentally whether a three-year course would not perhaps be

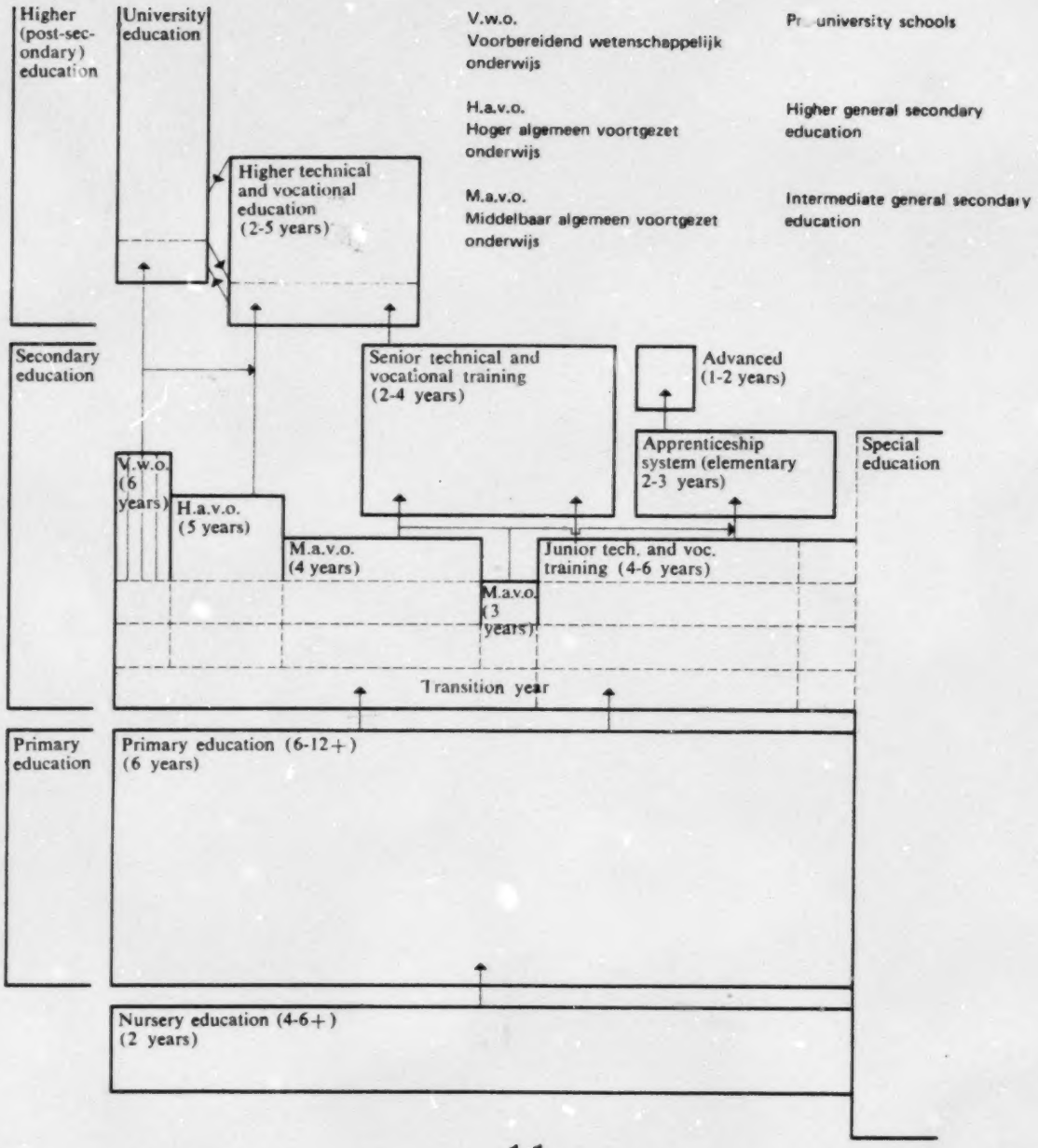
better. It is also possible that the best arrangement would be for the „middenschool" to have a 3-year course for some pupils and a 4-year course for others. Finally, experiments may show that 12 is not the most suitable age for the break between primary school and „middenschool".

– *Supplementary training of teachers*
The matter of how teachers can best be trained for their new duties will have to be investigated. Should this take place in a series of courses before they start or would it be preferable to do it during the experiments and in the light of direct experience in the renewal process? It is already obvious that the new duties of teachers are more specialised and more differentiated than in traditional teaching. New educational objectives require expertise to make them operational and teaching and learning processes require expertise to organise them. Moreover, the teachers will be working more as a team.

– *The optimum development of the least and most (cognitively) gifted*
If the experiments succeed, will the „middenschool" completely replace the first phase of present secondary education? In the United States, the East European countries, Japan and Sweden it has been decided that it will indeed do so. In Britain and in some Länder of Western Germany a dual system has been chosen: „middenschool" and traditional categorial system side by side. But it has been found that the „middenschool" cannot come properly into its own in a dual system such as this. For all these reasons the dual system is rejected for the Netherlands. Experiments must however be used to show in what way the „middenschool" can bring both the least gifted and the most gifted to the optimum development of their potential.

– *Interaction between government and schools*
The interaction between the central government and the schools must be optimal in the experiment. The central government is responsible for the whole of education and for planning the reforms. The schools have their own responsibilities for the arrangement, goals and content of the teaching. Within clearly defined limits, the schools must be able to retain this responsibility.
There are many problems to be solved. The experiments are a big gamble. The results are by no means certain. And yet there must be experiments. The first steps in the right direction mean that we cannot rest on our laurels but must make careful and gradual progress along the chosen road.

12. The current structure of education in the Netherlands



13. Ideas for the future structure of the Dutch Education System